

2017/18 Oversea Report

Paul Kovacs



Dear BNSC members

The beginning of the season seems like a very long time ago.

In November I flew to Davos, Switzerland. Where I joined the Australian National Team and begun training for the season. Training went quite well and I felt like I was headed towards good fitness, however I became ill early in the season that unfolded into a disappointing trend. I was not able to perform at 100% for the entire season it seemed. From Davos we travelled around Europe racing European cup, Austrian cup, Swiss cup and World Cups. I never quite showed my full potential in any of these races.

During training, intervals and other times I would feel very strong and healthy yet when I came to racing it seemed not possible for me to produce a maximum effort and record the points I needed.

My best result ended up being in a 20 km mass start race in a small Swiss/Italian village called Campra. However none of these results gave me the boost I needed to qualify for the Olympics.

In early February after my final attempt at qualifying I recognised that I would not be selected for the Olympic team. To miss out again on the Olympics was a very bitter and disappointing moment.

After not qualifying I left the Australian team and headed to Austria to spend some time with some friends in Innsbruck before travelling further north to more friends in Germany. I spent a few more days relaxing and having fun catching up with old friends before I flew back to Alaska where I'm still currently residing.

I have a new life working at a local gear shop and playing in the mountains. Having free time and resources now to pursue other activities has been amazingly refreshing and enjoyable. I still love cross country skiing yet I haven't been able to touch my cross-country skis since quitting the sport. I spend my time now between rock climbing, backcountry skiing, Ice hockey and soon running, camping and fishing.

However the highlight of my season actually came on a stroke of luck. I had heard that a friend of mine was looking for one more team member in a three-person team to compete in the Alaskan Mountain Wilderness Ski Classic. A small yet very serious race, it's almost whispered and revered by the athletic community here in Alaska. The race is completely self supported through the wilderness for anywhere between 250km to 350km. You pick your route and you simply get dropped off at the start and you have to make it to the finish line within 8 days. The fastest team wins. The only rules are you're not allowed to receive any outside help and you're not allowed to use roads. So for seven days my teammates and I skied across the Arctic Circle navigating our way through the most northerly mountain range in Alaska, which is the Brooks Range.

It was extremely tough to do a seven day trip where we would ski up to 15 hours a day before making camp, sleeping for a few hours and beginning again. I've never been so cold in my life nor so tired. At times the mercury drop below the -30°C with wind blowing from the north. Yet the stunning scenery during the day was amazing and made up for the very cold and bitter nights. It was breathtakingly beautiful and extremely challenging, yet so rewarding to finish. As fortune would have it, my teammates and I actually won the the event!

Only 40 people were allowed to start this year and of those 40 people only five people finished including my team of three. Conditions were extremely difficult due to extremely heavy snowfalls in the Arctic Circle and bad avalanche conditions. At times we were breaking trail in metre deep snow.

We were the first team to cross the line on the seventh day of the race. Originally we all assumed that we were coming close to last because our progress was so slow. However we chose a risk free path that involved very few mountain crossings where as other teams chose direct routs that involve high mountain passes. All those teams had to turn back due to severe avalanche conditions and they forfeited the race. We were able to continue skiing and make it all the way down.

Apart from the cold temperatures in the Arctic we also faced many other challenges on the south side of Brooks Range. We skied along the river valleys and the ice this year was rather weak and rotten covering the rivers. At times we would break through as we cross the rivers. All three of us in the team fell into the rivers at some point due to the ice breaking underneath us. It's a rather terrifying experience having the ground beneath you collapse. Fortunately none of us were hurt and we were able to dry out and survive. We finished on the 7th day, skiing over 65 km, finishing at 2 AM in the morning. The feeling of euphoria crossing the finish line and just simply knowing it was done and a warm bed awaited was just amazing. It is far more rewarding than any cross country ski race I've ever done. The accomplishment of knowing that we had skied self supported all the way through the Brooks range in the Arctic Circle was just a very powerful, positive experience.

Right now I am recovering after the race, I'm certainly sleeping a lot and eating a lot after having pushed my body so hard for seven days. Now that spring has arrived in Alaska the corn skiing is looking amazing.

I currently am working in Alaska Mountaineering Hiking, which is a local expedition shop in Anchorage and it's been a fantastic learning experience. It is the premier climbing, skiing, camping shop for people to come through that wish to climb Denali, the tallest mountain in North America. I'm often met with fantastic people that have done amazing adventures throughout Alaska..

Now that I'm retired from skiing I have much more time to enjoy the outdoors and other activities in a few months time I'll begin a road trip down south through Canada, through America into Mexico on a four month long journey before flying back to Australia in December. I hope everyone's had a fantastic summer and looking forward to the winter. I'm sure I'll catch up with everyone soon.

The support of the Birkebeiner Nordic Ski Club has been amazing. I could not of done what I've done without the support of the ski club, so I'm extremely grateful and indebted to the club. I look forward to being able to pay the club overtime for giving so much to me and to pay it forward to the next generation. This will be my last trip report for the club as a pro athlete on the grant system, so I thank everyone that's read my reports over the years and I thank the club for support once again I wish the club nothing but success in the future I look forward to seeing you all again soon when I'm back in Australia.

Warm regards
Paul Kovacs